

Valley Forge: Would You Have Quit?

The first two years of the American Revolution had not gone well for the Continental Army. Since the summer of 1775 when he had taken command, George Washington and his troops had withdrawn from Boston and retreated from New York City. Most recently, in October 1777, he had been unable to stop the British when General Howe marched his army into the national capital of Philadelphia. True, there had been a victory at Trenton and a success at Princeton, but on the whole Washington's army had seen hard times.

Not surprisingly, Washington was having trouble keeping his soldiers in the army. Some of his men had signed on for one or two years. However, the most frequent time of enlistment was nine months. Nine-month men were going home and not returning. Others simply deserted.

To make matters worse, Washington's own position was uncertain. Some members of Congress did not trust him. To them, the general from Virginia seemed to be leading a grand retreat.

Like much of America, Philadelphia was divided over the war. Some Philadelphians even welcomed the British. A few young women developed "scarlet fever," a fascination with British soldiers and their bright red coats. Washington's own Chief of Engineers wrote that, "There is a hundred times more enthusiasm for this revolution ... in Paris than there is in all the United States together."

With Howe's army of 18,000 comfortably quartered in Philadelphia, Washington decided

to build a winter camp at Valley Forge about 18 miles northwest of Philadelphia.

It was not big enough to be called a village, with only a few fieldstone houses and a mill for forging iron. The Quaker farms in the area offered the promise of food for his men, and the camp would be close enough to Philadelphia to keep an eye on the British.

It was the week before Christmas, 1777. The first job of the men was to build log "huts." Each hut was 16' by 14' with a door at one end, a stick and clay fireplace at the other, and no windows. Each hut slept twelve men. There were no beds, just straw on the mud floor. Cold

was one problem; smoke was another. The huts would be home for the next six months.

Some of the conditions experienced by the soldiers at Valley Forge are revealed in the four documents that follow. Today we know that most of the army



survived the winter. We also know that on April 13, 1778, word reached camp that the French would join the Americans in the war. It was a huge turning point. But what we know today was not known in late December, 1777. Victory seemed a long way off; in fact for many, it seemed unlikely.

Now it is time to look into your own heart of hearts. Your 9-month enlistment is up on February 1st, just one month away. General Washington is desperate to keep his army in tact. You miss your family and are concerned about your aging mother. Examine the documents that follow and answer the question: *Had you been a soldier at Valley Forge, would you have quit?*

Doc A

Estimates of Illness and Deaths at Valley Forge (December 1777- February 1778)

Total Soldiers at Valley Forge (Estimates)

December 1777	12,000
February 1778	8,000

Illness Estimate During Encampment

December 23, 1777	8,898
February 11, 1778	3,989

Death Estimates Due to Illness During Encampment

December - June	1,800 - 2,500
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Source: Painting by William Powell, Committee of Congress at Valley Forge, 1866



George Washington Presenting Congress members to soldiers at Valley Forge

Here to help

Document Analysis:

- (1) In what year was this painting created?
- (2) Who are the men on the left? Who are the men on the right? Who is the man in the middle?
- (3) How could you use this document to argue for quitting?
- (4) How could you use this document to argue for staying?

Document C

Source: Diary of Dr. Abigence Waldo, a Connecticut surgeon, 1777.

Note: Dr. Waldo suffered during his winter at Valley Forge but stayed loyal to the Continental Army as he helped other surgeons care for sick soldiers.

December 14, 1777

The Army which has been surprisingly healthy hitherto, now begins to grow sickly from the continued fatigues they have suffered this Campaign. Yet they still show a spirit of Alacrity (cheerful willingness) and Contentment not to be expected from so young Troops. I am Sick – discontented – and out of humour. Poor food – hard lodging – Cold Weather – fatigue – Nasty Cloaths – nasty Cookery – Vomit half my time – smok'd out my senses – the Devil's in't – I can't Endure it – Why are we sent here to starve and Freeze.... There comes a Soldier, his bare feet are seen thro' his worn out Shoes, his legs nearly naked from the tatter'd remains of an only pair of stockings....

December 21, 1777

"Heartily wish myself at home, my Skin and eyes are almost spoil'd with continual smoke. A general cry thro' the Camp this Evening among the Soldiers, "No Meat! No Meat!" – the Distant vales Echo'd back the melancholy sound -- "No Meat! No Meat!"

Document Analysis

1. Do you believe this document is an accurate picture of camp life at Valley Forge? Why?
2. What hardship described by Waldo most gets your attention?
3. Make one inference about the quality of ventilation in the soldiers' huts.
4. How could this document be used to argue for quitting?
5. Is there any way this document could be used to argue against quitting?

Here to
help
your
process.

Document D

Source: Thomas Paine, *The American Crisis*, December 23, 1776.

Note: General Washington had essays from *The American Crisis* read aloud to his soldiers at Valley Forge. Paine, known by some as the author of the Revolution, took no payment for this historic publication.

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“THESE are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value.... Britain, with an army to enforce her tyranny, has declared that she has a right (not only to TAX) but ‘to BIND us in ALL CASES WHATSOEVER,’ and if being bound in that manner, is not slavery, then is there not such a thing as slavery upon earth.”

Document Analysis

1. When was this document written and who was the author?
2. What is meant by the line, “These are the times that try men’s souls”?
3. Who are “The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot”?
4. What is “tyranny” and what does Paine compare it to?
5. What does Paine mean when he writes, “What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly”?
6. What is the main idea of this document?
7. Are the words of Thomas Paine enough to keep you at Valley Forge?

Excerpts from Thomas Paine's *The Crisis*

“THESE are the times that try men's souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country but he that stands it NOW, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph... What we obtain too cheaply, we esteem too lightly: tis' dearness only that gives everything its value...

“I call not upon a few, but upon all . . . lay your shoulders to the wheel; better have too much force than too little, when so great an object is at stake. Let it be told to the future world, that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, come forth to meet and to repulse it. . . .”

The Crisis, No. 1, December 23, 1776.

“He that is not a supporter of the independent States of America . . . is, in the American sense of the word, A TORY; and the instant that he endeavors to bring his toryism into practice, he becomes A TRAITOR.”

“America, till now, could never be called a free country, because her legislation depended on the will of a man three thousand miles distant, whose interest was in opposition to ours, and who, by a single “no,” could forbid what law he pleased.”

“ . . . after the coolest reflections on the matter, this must be allowed, that Britain was too jealous of America to govern it justly; too ignorant of it to govern it well; and too far distant from it to govern it at all.”

The Crisis, No. 3, April 19, 1777.

“We know the cause which we are engaged in . . . We are not moved by the gloomy smile of a worthless king, but by the ardent glow of generous patriotism. We fight not to enslave, but to set a country free, and to make room upon the earth for honest men to live in.”

The Crisis, No. 4, September 12, 1777.

“It is the object only of war that makes it honorable. And if there was ever a just war since the world began, it is this in which America is now engaged. She invaded no land . . . hired no mercenaries. . . . She wanted nothing from you [England], and was indebted for nothing to you: and thus circumstanced, her defence is honorable and her prosperity is certain.”

The Crisis, No. 5, March 21, 1778.